

In Memoriam

Warren E. Roberts, 1924–1999

My fondest memory of Warren Roberts is from the time our class went with him on a tour of carved limestone tombstones in southern Indiana cemeteries. It was springtime, and the countryside was full of dogwoods and redbuds in bloom. He drove us in a van, waving to people we passed on the two-lane roads as if they were all old friends, pointing out architectural features on buildings along the way. He took us to one small cemetery with a low stone wall around it and a little white clapboard chapel on its grounds. Helping himself to the key hanging beside the door, he led us into the chapel. It was very plain inside, and we settled into the wooden pews to talk about what we had seen. Then Dr. Roberts began to sing “The Old Rugged Cross.” He had a wonderful singing voice, and in that little chapel, with springtime blooming outside; it was a very special moment, one I still cherish.

Barbara Truesdell, Ph.D., 1996

Warren Roberts’s achievements will be documented by historians of folklore studies. The first American Ph.D. in folklore; the many publications; the early work in folk narrative studies, including the classic *Tale of the Kind and the Unkind Girls* (1958); the exemplary and pioneering work in material culture studies, which did so much to broaden the scope of American folkloristics; the considerable work in historic preservation and architectural restoration in southern Indiana; and, perhaps most importantly, his skill as a teacher and mentor to students. From the early 1960s until his retirement in 1994, his classes steered a great many students into material culture studies; among them were some of the best known scholars in this field. His instruction provided a thorough grounding in research techniques, and an understanding of material culture that was at once intellectual, sensual, and emotional.

Warren Roberts’s achievements were not confined to academia. A very fine singer, Dr. Roberts had a passion for Gilbert and Sullivan, which he performed often on stage, and he could sing a powerful ballad or hymn. He was also a skilled woodworker; his achievements included designing

and building the saltbox house in which he and his wife Barbara raised their family, and crafting three sets of double wooden doors for the First Presbyterian Church of Bloomington, which his family attended.

Ultimately, it was the note of *humanity* in everything he did which endeared Dr. Roberts to his students, colleagues, and friends. In his scholarly work on material culture, Dr. Roberts consistently sought out the human dimension of the artifact. In "The Tools Used in Building Log Houses in Southern Indiana" (1977), for example, he looked at folk architecture, which had been dealt with almost exclusively in terms of structural typologies, as a craft carried on by skilled individuals and communities; in his studies of antique furniture in southern Indiana, he brought in a biographical, craft-oriented approach that had rarely been applied to this subject.

In his classes, Dr. Roberts's love of scholarship and for the people and objects he studied was infectious. He could easily lecture for an hour on a single chair, without losing a note of his passionate interest. His field trips were especially memorable because of his obvious enjoyment and his encyclopedic knowledge of southern Indiana material culture, his charm and grace, and his tendency to break into song. His skill as a craftsman and his love for and insight into the craft process permeated both his scholarship and his teaching.

Dr. Roberts's sense of humanity also extended to students. His acts of kindness varied—from going to bat for "his" students at faculty meetings to carving wooden toys for students' children. His calmness and common sense were always reassuring.

As a first year Folklore graduate student without a clear idea of where my studies were headed, Dr. Roberts's classes were the beginning of a lifelong fascination with folk art and architecture. His numerous field trips taught me much about doing sensitive, thorough, respectful field work. For him teaching did not end with his classes; he liked to think of himself as a mentor to his students, and he stayed in touch with me, discussed my work, and shared insights from his own work, until his death.

Marie Walter, one of his first graduate students, describes Dr. Roberts's influence:

I remember how to approach research, how to persist, how to be scrupulous in documentation, and how to write with a flair the driest of facts. And how to be gentle and patient with a student, no matter how intransigent. That I learned well from Dr. Warren Roberts.

Warren Roberts never forgot the truth at the heart of our calling as folklorists: underneath the academic rhetoric, we are dealing with the passions, loves, skills and understandings of human communities.

He will be missed.

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